

JOHN SMITH
1579 or 1580–1631

The first man to promote the permanent settlement of America, and the first to attempt it successfully, was the English soldier and adventurer Captain John Smith. Before he was twenty-five years old he had battled in the Netherlands and Hungary, fought at sea off the African coast, and been captured and taken as a slave to Constantinople.

When Smith sailed late in 1606 for America, trouble and excitement awaited him. Captured by Indians in Virginia, he was brought to their leader, Powhatan, and threatened with death. He was rescued by Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas (her real name was Matoaka), and he was made Powhatan's son. Badly burned in an explosion in 1609, he went back to England, only to return to America five years later—this time to New England, where he explored the coasts of Maine and Massachusetts.

Smith contributed more to the settlement of America than colorful adventures. He founded Jamestown, Virginia, the first English colony; he gave New England its name; he made excellent maps that continued to be used for two hundred years. Like many others, he also wrote about his experiences in the new land. His writings include the first English book on America, *A True Relation of Virginia* (1608). The selection that follows comes from Smith's longest and most important work, *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624). He partly wrote the book himself and partly compiled it from accounts by others. While describing the founding of Jamestown for readers across the Atlantic, he also encouraged them to settle in America, appealing to their sense of personal and national glory and to their hope of economic advancement. He also described at length his "cat-and-mouse" relationship with the Indians; each looked for an advantage, so that "we sometimes had peace and war twice in a day."



Captain John Smith, detail from Smith's map of Virginia (1616).

But Smith's deeper intention in his *General History* was to clear away European myths about America. To those back home who insisted on finding gold where there was none, or uncovering a route to the South Seas when none existed, he answered: "I know no reason but to believe my own eyes before any man's imagination." Europeans idealized America, but he had been there. He had learned that to make America thrive required not fantasies but patience, a sense of glory, an experienced commander, and, above all, hard work.

Smith's encounter with America ended in disappointment. The company that sponsored his voyage to Virginia replaced him as commander, and for his efforts awarded him "Smith's Isles." They consisted, he said, "of barren rocks, the most overgrown with such shrubs and sharp whins [thorns] you can hardly pass them."

The Granger Collection, New York

FROM The General History

In his *General History*, John Smith tells of the difficult early days of the Jamestown colonists after the ship that had brought them departed. The supplies that the ship had left eventually gave out. Exhausted and sick, the colonists nonetheless labored to build defenses against Indian attacks. But Smith records that, at the height of the colonists' misery, the Indians seemed to have a change of heart, and "brought such plenty of their fruits, and provision, as no man wanted." Smith criticizes the president of the colony for his poor judgment and indolence. Referring to himself in the third person, he tells how he gradually assumed most of the responsibility for organizing the colony.



What Happened Till the First Supply

Being thus left to our fortunes, it fortuned that within ten days scarce ten amongst us could either go¹ or well stand, such extreme weakness and sickness oppressed us. And thereat none need marvel, if they consider the cause and the reason, which was this.

Whilst the ships stayed, our allowance was somewhat bettered, by a daily proportion of biscuit,² which the sailors would pilfer to sell, give, or exchange with us, for money, sassafras, furs, or love. But when they departed, there remained neither tavern, beer house, nor place of relief but the common kettle.³ Had we been as free from all sins as gluttony and drunkenness, we might have been canonized for saints; but our President⁴ would never have been ad-

mitted, for engrossing to his private⁵ oatmeal, sack,⁶ oil, aqua vitae,⁷ beef, eggs, or what not, but the kettle; that indeed he allowed equally to be distributed, and that was half a pint of wheat, and as much barley boiled with water for a man a day, and this having fried some twenty-six weeks in the ship's hold, contained as many worms as grains, so that we might truly call it rather so much bran than corn; our drink was water, our lodgings castles in the air.

With this lodging and diet, our extreme toil in bearing and planting pallisadoes⁸ so strained and bruised us, and our continual labor in the extremity of the heat had so weakened us, as were cause sufficient to have made us as miserable in our native country, or any other place in the world.

1. go: be active.

2. biscuit: hardtack, a kind of hard bread.

3. the common kettle: the communal cooking pot.

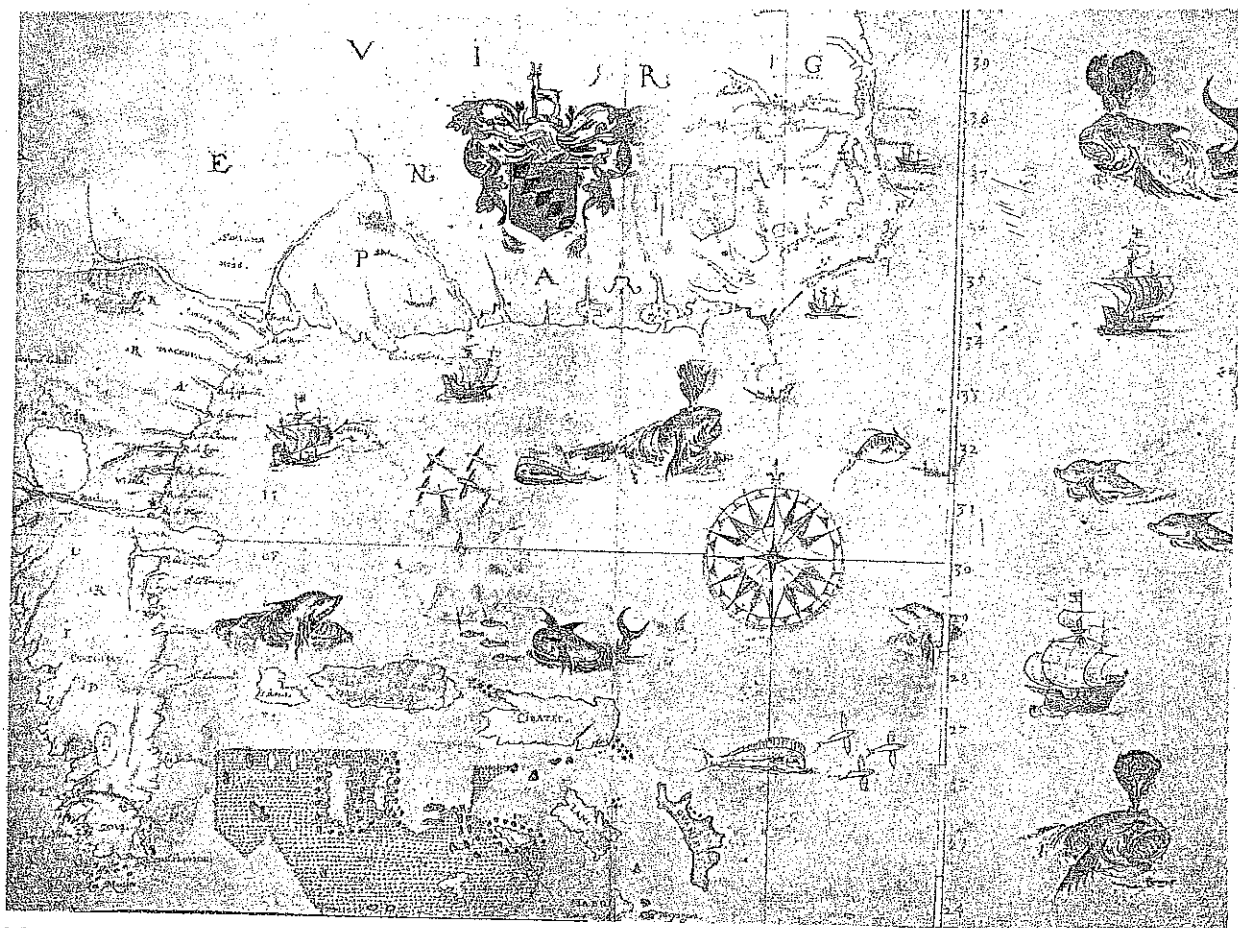
4. our President: the head of the colony, Wingfield.

5. engrossing to his private: taking for his private use.

6. sack: a kind of dry white wine.

7. aqua vitae (ä'kwə vi'tē): strong liquor.

8. pallisadoes (pāl'a-sād'ōz): palisades, large pointed stakes set in the ground as a means of defense.



The Granger Collection, New York

Manuscript map of North America from Florida to Chesapeake Bay (c. 1585) by John White. White, who was governor of the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island, did a number of watercolors of Indian life.

From May to September, those that escaped lived upon sturgeon and sea crabs; fifty in this time we buried; the rest, seeing the President's projects to escape these miseries in our pinnace⁹ by flight (who all this time had neither felt want nor sickness), so moved our dead spirits as we deposed him, and established Ratcliffe in his place. . . .

But now was all our provision spent, the sturgeon gone, all helps abandoned, each hour expecting the fury of the savages; when God,

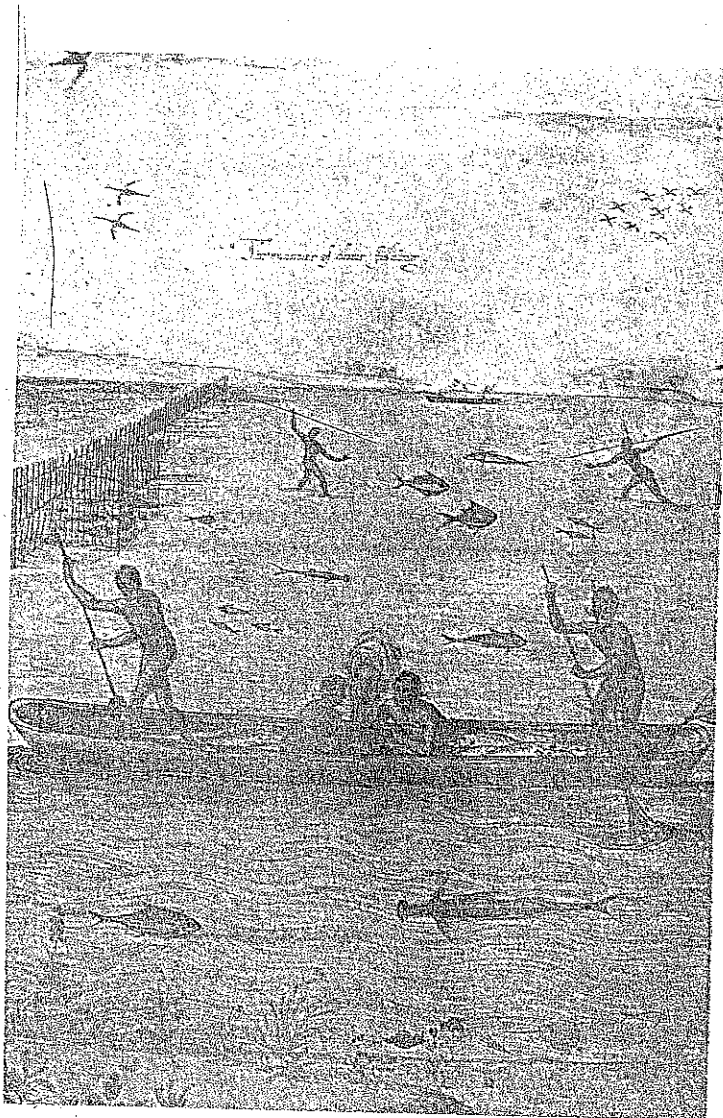
9. pinnace (pīn'is): small sailing ship.

the patron of all good endeavors, in that desperate extremity so changed the hearts of the savages that they brought such plenty of their fruits, and provision, as no man wanted.

And now where some affirmed it was ill done of the Council¹⁰ to send forth men so badly provided, this uncontradictable reason will show them plainly they are too ill-advised to nourish such ill conceits:¹¹ first, the fault of our going was our own; what could be thought

10. Council: the group of seven men who had charge of the expedition in Virginia.

11. conceits: flights of the imagination.



The Manner of Their Fishing. Drawing by John White.

Photographed at the British Museum by Lee Boltin

fitting or necessary we had; but what we should find, or want, or where we should be, we were all ignorant, and supposing to make our passage in two months, with victual to live, and the advantage of the spring to work; we were at sea five months, where we both spent our victual and lost the opportunity of the time and season to plant, by the unskillful presumption of our ignorant transporters, that understood not at all what they undertook.

Such actions have ever since the world's beginning been subject to such accidents; and everything of worth is found full of difficulties; but nothing so difficult as to establish a commonwealth so far remote from men and means, and where men's minds are so untoward¹² as neither do well themselves nor suffer others. But to proceed.

The new President, and Martin,¹³ being little beloved, of weak judgment in dangers, and less industry in peace, committed the managing of all things abroad to Captain Smith: who by his own example, good words, and fair promises, set some to mow, others to bind thatch, some to build houses, others to thatch them, himself always bearing the greatest task for his own share, so that in short time, he provided most of them [with] lodgings, neglecting any for himself.

With a small party, Captain Smith set out to explore the Chickahominy River. During the expedition, he and his men were unexpectedly attacked by the Indians, and he was taken prisoner.

The manner how they used and delivered him is as followeth.

The savages having drawn from George Cassen whither Captain Smith was gone, prosecuting¹⁴ that opportunity they followed him with three hundred bowmen, conducted by the King of Pamaunkee,¹⁵ who in divisions searching the turnings of the river, found Robinson and Emry¹⁶ by the fireside: those they shot full of arrows and slew. Then finding the Captain, as is said, that used the savage that was his guide as his shield (three of them being slain and divers¹⁷ others so galled), all the rest would not come near him. Thinking thus to have returned to his boat, regarding them, as he marched, more than his way, [he] slipped

12. untoward: stubborn or unruly.

13. Martin: the colonist John Martin.

14. prosecuting: taking advantage of.

15. Pamaunkee: the Pamunkey River.

16. Robinson and Emry: colonists John Robinson and Thomas Emry.

17. divers (dī'vərz): several.

up to the middle in an oozy creek and his savage with him; yet durst they not come to him till being near dead with cold, he threw away his arms. Then according to their composition¹⁸ they drew him forth and led him to the fire, where his men were slain. Diligently they chafed his benumbed limbs.

He demanding for their Captain, they showed him Opechankanough, King of Pamunkey, to whom he gave a round ivory double compass dial. Much they marveled at the playing of the fly and needle,¹⁹ which they could see so plainly, and yet not touch it because of the glass that covered them. But when he demonstrated by that globelike jewel the roundness of the earth and skies, the sphere of the sun, moon, and stars, and how the sun did chase the night round about the world continually; the greatness of the land and sea, the diversity of nations, variety of complexions, and how we were to them antipodes,²⁰ and many other such like matters, they all stood as amazed with admiration.

Notwithstanding, within an hour after, they tied him to a tree, and as many as could stand about him prepared to shoot him: but the King holding up the compass in his hand, they all laid down their bows and arrows, and in a triumphant manner led him to Orapaks, where he was after their manner kindly feasted and well used. . . .

At last they brought him to Werowocomoco, where was Powhatan, their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had been a monster; till Powhatan and his train had put themselves in their gravest braveries. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe, made of raccoon skins, and all the tails hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of sixteen or eighteen years, and along on each side the house, two rows of

men, and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red, many of their heads bedecked with the white down of birds, but everyone with something; and a great chain of white beads about their necks.

At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queen of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, instead of a towel, to dry them. Having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperor was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselves. For the King himself will make his own robes, shoes, bows, arrows, pots; plant, hunt, or do anything so well as the rest.

Two days after, Powhatan having disguised himself in the most fearfulest manner he could, caused Captain Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. Not long after, from behind a mat that divided the house, was made the most dolefullest noise he ever heard; then Powhatan, more like a devil than a man, with some two hundred more as black²¹ as himself, came unto him and told him now they were friends, and presently he should go to Jamestown, to send him two great guns and a grindstone, for which he would give him the country of Capahowosick, and forever esteem him as his son Nantaquoud.

So to Jamestown with twelve guides Powhatan sent him. That night they quartered in the

18. **composition:** ways.

19. **fly and needle:** parts of a compass. The needle moves over the fly, on which the compass points are marked.

20. **antipodes** (än-tŭp'a-dēz'): two places opposite one another on the earth.

21. **black:** painted black.



Pocahontas (oil on canvas) by unidentified artist, after Simon van de Passe's 1616 engraving.

woods, he still expecting (as he had done all this long time of his imprisonment) every hour to be put to one death or other, for all their feasting. But almighty God (by his divine providence) had mollified the hearts of those stern barbarians with compassion. The next morning betimes they came to the fort, where Smith having used the savages with what kindness he could, he showed Rawhunt, Powhatan's trusty servant, two demiculverins²² and a millstone to carry [to] Powhatan: they found them somewhat too heavy; but when they did see him discharge them, being loaded with stones, among the boughs of a great tree loaded with icicles, the ice and branches came so tumbling down that the poor savages ran away half dead with fear. But at last we regained some conference with them, and gave them such toys, and sent to Powhatan, his women, and children such presents, as gave them in general full content.

22. demiculverin (dēm'ē-kūl'var-īn): a type of cannon.

Now in Jamestown they were all in combustion,²³ the strongest preparing once more to run away with the pinnacle; which with the hazard of his life, with saker falcon²⁴ and musket shot, Smith forced now the third time to stay or sink.

Some no better than they should be, had plotted with the President, the next day to have put him to death by the Levitical law,²⁵ for the lives of Robinson and Emry, pretending the fault was his that had led them to their ends: but he quickly took such order with such lawyers that he laid them by the heels till he sent some of them prisoners for England.

Now every once in four or five days, Pocahontas, with her attendants, brought him so much provision that saved many of their lives that else for all this had starved with hunger.

His relation of the plenty he had seen, especially at Werowocomoco, and of the state and bounty of Powhatan (which till that time was unknown), so revived their dead spirits (especially the love of Pocahontas) as all men's fear was abandoned.

Thus you may see what difficulties still crossed any good endeavor; and the good success of the business being thus oft brought to the very period of destruction; yet you see by what strange means God hath still delivered it.

23. combustion: tumult.

24. saker (sā'kər) falcon: a light cannon.

25. Levitical law: from the Bible, Leviticus 24:17, a law stating that anyone responsible for another person's death should be put to death as punishment.

Reading Check

1. Why did the colonists depose Wingfield, the head of the colony?
2. List three of the reasons Smith gives for the colonists' hardships.
3. Who kept the colonists from starving?
4. What presents did Smith give to King Powhatan?
5. What charge was brought against Smith when he returned to Jamestown?

John Smith (1579 or 1580–1631)

from **THE GENERAL HISTORY** (Pages 15–22)

Understanding the Writer and His Background

1. List three of John Smith's contributions to the settlement of America.

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

2. In addition to attracting settlers to the Americas, what was Smith's intention in *The General History*?

Understanding the Selection

3. According to Smith, the Jamestown Colony was plagued by a number of problems. Identify five of those problems.

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STUDY GUIDE—CONTINUED

4. Smith points out undesirable characteristics of the other colonists, particularly of those in charge of the colony. Give three examples of these undesirable characteristics.

5. Smith also points out desirable characteristics of the colonists, using himself as an example. Give two examples of these desirable characteristics.

6. What did Smith do to impose order on the colony?

7. According to Smith, how did the colony profit from his relationship with the Indians?

Understanding Vocabulary

8. Find each of the words below in the excerpt from *The General History*. Determine the word's meaning from the way it is used in context. Then check the meaning given in the glossary. On the lines provided below, use each word in an original sentence that reveals its meaning.

canonize(d) (page 16) _____

gall(ed) (page 18) _____

mollify(-ied) (page 20) _____

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Understanding Literary Elements

9. Writing is often classified according to four forms of discourse: description, narration, exposition, and persuasion. Give an example of each form as used by John Smith in *The General History*.

Description: _____

Narration: _____

Exposition: _____

Persuasion: _____

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Writing and Responding to Literature

- 10.** Write a paraphrase of the following sentence so that the ideas are easier to understand.

Now in Jamestown they were all in combustion, the strongest preparing once more to run away with pinnace; which with the hazard of his life, with saker falcon and musket shot, Smith forced now the third time to stay or sink.

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